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ABSTRACT

The verbal interaction between a laboratory school class of sixth/seventh grade students and their teacher during 18 social studies discussions was analyzed in order to identify teacher techniques relevant to student discourse and student passivity. Classroom discussions were taped, transcribed, and analyzed according to an adaptation of the Bellack system of "chess moves." These moves--structuring, soliciting, responding, and reacting--were used to note who spoke and when. Content of what each participant said was derived from a separate study of the data. The overall study indicated that students contributed more often than the teacher to discussion. The teacher moved the discussion along by reacting to students rather than by soliciting information from them. However, solicitation was the second most frequent move. While this experiment was conducted in a laboratory school of a college of education, the findings are relevant to conventional classroom teaching strategies. It is suggested that teachers may generate more student engagement by asking fewer questions and listening more closely to student comments. (LP)

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AN APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF STUDENT PASSIVITY IN CLASSROOM SETTINGS

JUDITH B. MacDONALD

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (68th, New Orleans, LA, April 23-27, 1984).

Précis

An Approach to the Problem of Student Passivity in Classroom Settings

This paper analyzes the verbal interactions of one class of middle school students and their teacher during social studies discussions. The study took place in the Laboratory School of the Bank Street College of Education.

An adaptation of the Bellack system was developed to analyze the discussions using both a quantitative and interpretive approach to the findings. Teacher behaviors and in particular non-questioning stratcgies which seemed to elicit student discourse were identified and analyzed. It is suggested in this paper that these findings have relevance in other educational settings in addressing the problem of student passivity. By examining their behavior in discourse, teachers may identify elements which invite or inhibit student engagement.

An Approach to the Problem of Student Passivity in Classroom Settings

While schooling has received its deserved share of attention in 1983, the problems uncovered by this current focus generate no easy solutions. In fact, research studies provide data which can be adapted to educational persuasions as diverse as S. Engelmann's is from A.S. Neill's. Yet, one question which seems to be common among competing ideologies is how to engage students in learning so that they will be competent, confident learners. Stated from the teacher's perspective, what can we do to confront the state of passivity which seems to afflict students at all levels of schooling? Do we unwittingly contribute to an educational atmosphere which we fundamentally deplore? More importantly, can we by examining our teaching behavior identify elements which may invite or inhibit student engagement?

In a recent study Goodlad (1983) found that a central problem in classrooms was too much "teacher talk." Similar results were reported more than a decade earlier (Flanders, 1970; Hoetker & Albrand, 1969; Bellack, 1966).

If one of the goals of education in a democracy is to encourage students to express, develop and share ideas, one of our tasks as teachers is to create learning environments in which such expression may occur. The group discussion is a likely setting for collaborative exploration of ideas and was singled out as such as long ago as 1896 by Dewey in the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. More recent studies have examined verbal interactions in discussions (Taba, 1962; Bellack, 1966; Moffett, 1968; Barnes, 1976). It is noteworthy that the question of student participation in discussions has now reached the graduate school level with some members of the Harvard Law School faculty proposing that student participation be a factor in determining grades (McQuaid, 1983).

It is suggested in this paper that an analysis of discussions in a middle school classroom revealed teacher behaviors which may be relevant in exploring the issue of student passivity. Since it has been found that learnings in one setting are relevant to our knowledge in others (Bruner, 1966), it is hoped that the findings in this study will have potential application in other educational settings.

Method

The subjects of this study were one class of sixth/seventh grade students and their teacher. The class was in the Laboratory school of the Bank Street College of Education in New York City. Eighteen social studies discussions were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed by an adaptation of the Bellack system (1966). Basically the system identifies who speaks, when they speak

and what they say. In this study Bellack's conventions or "moves," as in a chess game, were used to note who spoke and when they spoke, but the content of what was said or "categories of meaning" were derived from a study of the data.

Briefly summarized, there are four types of "moves": structuring, soliciting, responding, and reacting. The reacting move is of special interest because it represents an unelicited comment and is notable in analyzing teacher-student discourse.

Three categories of meaning developed from examining the content of the discussions: substantive, functional, and procedural. Substantive categories of meaning refer to the cognitive and affective processes expressed in the discourse. Functional categories concern the course or direction of the discussion and narrow or broaden the focus of discourse. Functional comments were made mainly by the teacher and reflect her style of discussion-leading. Procedural categories relate to classroom management and organization and they, too, were principally made by the teacher.

Results

A comparison of teacher-student talk indicated that the students contributed more often than the teacher to the discussions. This finding is notable because it represents a departure from reported patterns of discourse (Bellack, 1966; Flanders, 1970).

Examination of reacting moves yielded particularly interesting results. It may be recalled that reactions are unelicited comments and thus are not conventionally "necessary" in the discourse as, for example, responses to questions are. Both the teacher and students used this "move" more than the others, and, in fact, student reactions exceeded the teacher's. Teacher reactions are somewhat different from student reactions in that it is not uncommon for a teacher to comment on a student's response to a question whereas it is less likely that students would comment on a remark of a teacher or other students. Yet, this uncommon behavior occurred with frequency, indicating that student participation was more self initiated than teacher solicited.

The preponderance of teacher reactions demonstrates that the teacher moved the discussion along by reacting to students rather than by soliciting information from them. This is not to suggest that the teacher did not ask questions. Solicitations were her second most frequent move, and it is of interest to note that a preponderance of her questions sought clarification of student comments.

The categories of functional meaning, "to highlight," "recapitulate," "restate," "repeat" and "hold" developed to identify the teacher's behavior. That is, a common practice of the teacher was, for example, to react to and restate what a student said. This behavior seemed to invite continued student participation as indicated by subsequent reacting moves. It suggests that as teachers we might generate greater student engagement by asking fewer questions and listening more closely to students' comments.

There is little research on the effects of non-questioning teacher behavior and the impact of teachers' comments on the flow and content of discourse. The notion that fewer direct questions generate greater student participation has a parallel in therapeutic settings: a therapist stimulates patient participation not by direct questioning but rather by commenting nonjudgmentally on the patient's remarks (MacKinnon & Michels, 1971). Similarly, a teacher may foster student engagement by collaborating with them in discussions rather than by asking rapid fire questions. If one speculates about ways of contending with student passivity, it could be asserted that participation increases as students feel free to take risks in expressing thoughts.

Educational Importance of the Study

The fact that this study took place in the laboratory school of a college of education imposes limitations upon generalizing its results. Yet by examining discourse in a unique setting, verbal behaviors were identified which may be relevant in more conventional classrooms. If a teacher's goal is to engage students in learning and if evidence of engagement is participation, we need to look at behaviors which effect that goal.

It is difficult for teachers simultaneously to lead a discussion and be reflective about their role in it. Teachers need opportunities for self-scrutiny in a safe environment. The analysis system developed in this study can be used as a staff development tool. Discussions can be video taped and categories collapsed to facilitate learning the system. By looking at their verbal behavior in light of the categories in this sytem, teachers might develop a new perspective about their role in classroom discourse.

While student passivity is not a phenomenon developed by teachers, it may not go away unless we examine and alter our behavior. Ours is the first move.

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